

Youth, Revolt, Recognition

The Young Generation during and after the “Arab Spring”

Edited by Isabel Schäfer



The Role of Artistic Protest Movements in the Egyptian Revolution

by Daniel Farrell

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The Role of Artistic Protest Movements in the Egyptian Revolution

Daniel Farrell

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to argue that artistic protest movements have had a significant impact on the unfolding of the dramatic political events that have taken place in Egypt over the past four years. Like all revolutions, the Egyptian revolution has been far from simple and has been influenced by a broad and complex range of factors. It will be argued here that artists of various kinds, many of them very young, have played a central and important role in shaping and communicating the demands of the protestors and in helping to drive the revolution forward. They have enabled people to discuss and debate political issues openly and have provided new mediums for people to express their opinions more freely. Artists' groups and collectives have been influential in bringing people together to co-operate and collaborate – thus increasing their impact on the course of the revolution – and in encouraging people who have never been active in politics before to find their voices. As Ursula Lindsey asserts: 'What Egyptians call the January 25 Revolution has undoubtedly ushered in a new sense of freedom, as well as a determination to use public space to congregate and connect, and to demonstrate support for the uprising through cultural activism' (2012).

Many different forms of artistic protest movement have taken part in the revolution, from rap music to street theatre to poetry, and they have each played a role in influencing it, often in collaboration with each other at cultural festivals, such as the Al-Fann Midan ('Art is a Square') festival in Cairo. This essay will examine the actions of young graffiti and street artists in the events of the revolution as a case study – focusing in particular on their role in encouraging young people to play an active part in it – in order to demonstrate the broader influence of artistic protest movements on political developments in Egypt since 2011.

Graffiti was, of course, not invented on Tahrir Square in January 2011, but has always existed as a way for people to express political opinions and can, to a certain extent, be considered as a barometer of public opinion. According to Chaffee: 'Graffiti writing is one of the easiest and most efficient ways for individuals and opposing groups to register political dissidence, express social alienation, propagate anti-system ideas, and establish an alternative collective memory' (1999, p. 127; cited in Findlay, 2012, p. 178). In particular, graffiti is a medium often used by disaffected young people who have little or no access to mainstream political channels. Much has been written about the submissive and inactive political position of young people in Egypt before the revolution and their virtual absence from the political decision-making process (Floris, 2012).

Indeed, the 2010 UN Development Programme report on the state of young people in Egypt found that those in the 18-29 age group were the least likely to engage in political activity. It also found that many young people felt they were being openly discouraged from taking an active role in politics at all, being encouraged instead to focus their energies on private concerns (UNDP, 2010, pp. 105-10). According to Makar, this created a false impression that young Egyptians were apathetic and politically unaware, a viewpoint she argues is contradicted by the leading roles taken by young people, including many young street and graffiti artists, in the revolution (2011, p. 311). Murphy has posited that 'the street' became the gathering place of choice for a generation of young people

frustrated by their exclusion from their country's traditional political structures and the system's refusal to reform or modernise to meet the needs of the population in the twenty-first century (2012, p. 11).

Thus, younger artists employed the ancient art of graffiti to express their opinions, speaking to a whole new generation of political activists who went on to play a central role in the revolution. The following sections will argue that graffiti has influenced the unfolding of political events in Egypt since 2011 in three main ways: firstly, as a means of spreading information and new ideas among the population; secondly, as a means of facilitating people in coming together to work collaboratively; and thirdly, as a medium for people to express themselves freely and to encourage more and more people, especially those from the so-called 'lost generation' of disillusioned youth, to play an active role in politics.

Spreading Information and Ideas

Grffiti played an important role in disseminating ideas and information among the public as the revolution unfolded. Before 2011, graffiti was a very rare sight in Egypt, with artists and society at large under constant threat of suppression by the government and its agents. However, with the outbreak of the revolution, graffiti began appearing all over Cairo, with the walls of the city turning into a canvas for the people to express their political demands and seek to spread new ideas among the population. Speaking in 2012, artist Abou Al Naga claimed that the graffiti across Cairo acted as a mirror reflecting what the country had experienced over the previous year (Mahmoud, 2012).

Works depicting and condemning the atrocities committed by the authorities served both as a form of protest and as a catalyst, mobilising people to continue the uprising against the government. The creation of portraits of those killed in the protests and at the hands of the police served both to commemorate those who had died for the cause of the revolution and to attack the regime for its actions (Elkamel, 2012). Thus, according to Kamran Rosen, graffiti, which has always been a highly controversial form of art, became much more than that; it became a type of war paint in the fight against the regime (2013).

As well as communicating the ideas of the protestors, graffiti also fulfilled a practical role in informing people of protests and rallies. For example, in the days leading up to 25 January 2011, one of the most important days of protest in the revolution, graffiti all over the city called for people to come out on that day and take part in the protests. Later on, as frustration with the slow pace of change following the resignation of President Mubarak grew, notices about further days of protest were carried across the city in the form of graffiti (The Real News, 2012). These sought to remind people that the revolution was not over, encouraging citizens to continue the struggle for reform and change. The works of graffiti made reference to what had been accomplished thus far, demonstrating to young people in particular that their actions had brought results, but also stressing the need to continue in order to consolidate what had been achieved and bring about lasting change. As well as spreading new ideas, graffiti and street art also provided a medium for people to come together and co-operate, as will be discussed in the next section.

Organisation and Collaboration

Artistic protest movements have played an important role in organising groups of people to work together, something that is vital to the success of any such protest action. Many artists' collectives have been set up, enabling artists of various kinds to come together and to collaborate on larger works in order to spread support for the revolution. One of the largest of these, the Revolution Artists' Union was founded by a diverse group of writers, poets, photographers, singers, filmmakers, painters and many more on Tahrir Square in January 2011 at the height of the revolution. They wanted to work together and support one another in using their art as a medium to promote the political ideas of the revolution (Ibid.).

Young graffiti artists have been central to these movements and many have organised the creation of large collaborative works of graffiti, some of which have become symbols of the revolution itself. For example, groups of street artists worked with traditional Arabic calligraphists to paint slogans throughout the city. One such work with the phrase 'I Love my Country' made into the shape of a heart signified for many the aims of the protestors and was printed on t-shirts worn by some who took part in the revolution.

In one co-ordinated event in May 2011 that garnered huge publicity, a group of graffiti artists stormed the headquarters of the Interior Ministry and covered it with portraits of protestor Khalid Said on the first anniversary of his death at the hands of police (Ibid.). These events demonstrate not only the importance of involving as many people in the revolution as possible, but also the significance that large organised events can have on shaping public opinion. In these cases, the graffiti artists were able to channel the feelings and emotions held by many people and use them to further the aims of the revolution. In March 2014, following international protests, two policemen, Awad Saleh and Mahmoud Ghazala, were found guilty of torturing Khalid Said to death, with both being sentenced to ten years in prison (Ahram Online 2014).

Another major collaborative event organised by young graffiti artists and which sought to encourage involvement in the revolution was the so-called 'Mad Graffiti Weekend' that took also place in May 2011. Initiated by Aida al-Kashef and 'Ganzeer', a multi-disciplinary artist who came to international attention during the revolution, the weekend was a direct response to the attempts being made by the authorities to cover up or remove the portraits of those who had died in the revolution. Seeing this as a form of censorship, the artists resolved to organise a special weekend during which they would create a large series of works across the city. Aida al-Kashef claimed that he and many others who were bothered by the censorship taking place felt they had to take action and re-cover the walls of the city with graffiti (Egypt Independent, 2011).

Groups of volunteers co-ordinated the activities of the artists, spreading the word over Twitter and creating a Google Map detailing the location of each work throughout the city (Ganzeer, 2011). This action led to the creation of one of the best-known works of graffiti from the Egyptian revolution, the image of a tank facing down a bread seller on his bike, which was painted by a large group of artists. Here, Ganzeer claimed, the artists were acting to defy openly the censorship being imposed on them in an effort to ensure that the streets of Egypt belong to the people and not the government (Ibid.). Artist Omar Mustafa who had painted a portrait of Amr al-Beheiri, a political activist who had been

arrested in February 2011 and sentenced to five years in prison by a military tribunal, repainted the portrait over Mad Graffiti Weekend. He said: 'I have repainted Amr's portrait, using a larger stencil this time', claiming he would continue to use the portrait as an 'awareness-raising icon against the injustices of military courts' (Egypt Independent, 2011).

As in many other aspects of the revolution, it was young artists who were to the forefront of this process and their participation encouraged other young people to get involved. One the most high-profile of these is Ganzeer, who helped to organise the Mad Graffiti Weekend and who participated in the creation of the mural of the bread seller facing down the tank referred to above. In fact, he became so well known and associated with the revolution that he was denounced on Egyptian television by broadcaster Osama Kamal in May 2014 and was forced to leave Egypt (Pollack, 2014). Large organised events like the Mad Graffiti Weekend helped to facilitate people in playing a role in the revolution by providing them with an opportunity to take part in a political activity. In this way, the young graffiti and street artists helped other young Egyptians to find their voices and provided a means for them to express their opinions and hopes for the future, as will be discussed below.

Free Expression and Involvement

The third main way in which graffiti – and artistic protest movements in general – has influenced the Egyptian revolution has been its role in providing forums for people to discuss and debate political issues openly and to express their opinions freely. This is arguably the most important function it has had in a society in which creativity and the free articulation of ideas were so heavily restricted for so long. The freeing of artistic expression in the revolution has been symbolic of the overall process of the liberation of Egyptian society from the grip of an authoritarian regime. The artistic protest movements have thus provided mediums for people to channel their thoughts, feelings and opinions about the political situation in their country and to communicate them openly for the first time.

The graffiti and other artists do not claim to have all the answers to the problems facing Egypt, but they have created forums for citizens of the country to come together and debate the issues in the hope of finding solutions. For example, 'Ganzeer' (a pseudonym meaning 'Bicycle Chain'), claims he goes by that name because he thinks of artists as a mechanism pushing change forward. He claims: 'We are not the driving force. We are not the people pedalling, but we connect ideas and by doing this we allow the thing to move' (Pollack, 2014). Indeed, critic and author Carlo McCormick has argued that Ganzeer and others like him are working more as activists than as artists (Ibid). With parts of the city essentially turned into open-air galleries, people have been confronted with new and different ideas as they go about their daily lives and they have the opportunity to discuss them with others gathered in public spaces. Indeed, the Revolution Artists' Union has roped off sections of wall across the city in order to allow graffiti artists to work and have people observe them (Themba Lewis Photography, 2014). Festivals such as the Al-Fann Midan mentioned above happen in the open as much as possible, inviting people to take part and interact with the subject matter in order to promote education on the issues and foster exchanges of views. They also work to ensure that the revolution is seen to be on-going process, the outcome of which can still be shaped and influenced by people, and not one that it over or whose conclusion has already been reached (Lindsey, 2012). The artistic protest movements have also allowed people who had never previously taken part in the political process to have their voices heard. The existence of alternative means of political activity

such as the graffiti and street art movements outside the traditional political channels has encouraged young people in particular to seek to play more of a role in the development of their country. In contrast to the closed nature of the pre-revolutionary political system, these artistic movements invite the public to take part as much as possible. Graffiti artists working on Tahrir Square have stressed that the inspiration behind their works has come not just from themselves, but also from speaking to people on the square and listening to their ideas. Some artists also referred to having conversations with people who could not read or write, people whose opinions are otherwise far less likely to be heard, and creating works based on these discussions (The Real News, 2012).

Conclusion

The revolution that has taken place in Egypt over the past three years has been influenced and affected by a large number of factors. One of these is undoubtedly the range of artistic protest movements that have sprung up throughout the country. These have included street theatre groups, writers, rappers and singers as well as the street and graffiti artists who have been the focus of this essay. These artists have benefitted greatly from the effect the revolution has had on weakening the censorship imposed on cultural expression in Egypt and on making Egyptian society more open to different thoughts and ideas on the future. In this sense, the artistic movements are both a cause and effect of the revolution, using the new sense of freedom and openness that resulted from it to drive forward the ideas of the protestors, shaping opinions and providing forums for debate, thus influencing the revolution itself.

Using graffiti and street art as a case study, this article has argued that the artistic protest movements have impacted on the events of the revolution in three main ways. Firstly, the artists have communicated the ideas of the protestors, spreading awareness of their demands among the population, as well as highlighting the atrocities committed by the regime. Much of the graffiti visible in Cairo has also had a practical function, informing people about protests and commemorating those who have died in the revolution. Secondly, the movements have worked to bring groups of people together to work towards a collective goal, a vital element in the success of such revolutions. This has helped to facilitate collaboration and co-operation by different groups of artists and has encouraged many people to take part in the protests.

Thirdly, the protest movements have provided forums and venues for people to express their opinions freely and openly, fostering discussion and debate among the population, particularly among many, such as young people, who have never been involved in politics before. The artists have also enabled the people of Egypt to channel their creativity at a time when the restrictions placed upon it by the authoritarian regime were being lifted. With the new regime of President al-Sisi, who came to power in 2013, and the military re-imposing many forms of censorship that had been lifted following the 2011 revolution, many young artists have continued to campaign and take part in public debates in order to ensure that the gains made then are not lost. Having played such a significant role during the revolution, artistic protest movements are continuing to fight for reform and a better future for Egypt.

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